

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Wales Institute of Science and Art



Prifysgol Cymru

Y Drindod Dewi Sant

University of Wales

Trinity Saint David

Sill and Tunnel Sizing for Frontal Crash

Automotive Chassis Systems - ACHA5013

Submission Date – Sunday 6th April 2025

Matthew Starke

2200996

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1. Introduction

The structural design of vehicles has evolved significantly over time, influenced by advancements in engineering principles, materials, manufacturing techniques, and safety regulations. Vehicle structures must balance strength, weight, aerodynamics, and crashworthiness, ensuring both performance and occupant protection. As automotive technology has progressed, key factors such as torsional and bending stiffness, aerodynamic efficiency, and crash safety standards have shaped modern vehicle designs. Additionally, consumer-driven safety assessments, such as Euro NCAP crash testing, have played a crucial role in setting benchmarks for vehicle crashworthiness and encouraging manufacturers to enhance structural integrity.

This report aims to examine the historical development of vehicle structures, focusing on the effects of manufacturing innovations, material advancements, and regulatory requirements on vehicle design.

In the first section of this report, I will explore the evolution of torsion, bending, aerodynamic considerations, and crash resistance in automotive structures, detailing how improvements in materials and safety regulations have shaped modern vehicles. Whilst in the second part of the report, I will apply Newton's Second Law to estimate the forces acting on critical structural components such as the sills and the central tunnel in the event of an impact.

2. Task 1 - Discuss how vehicle structures have historically developed

The development of vehicle structures has evolved significantly over time, driven by advancements in materials, manufacturing techniques, and safety requirements. Over time, vehicles have evolved from rudimentary frames to complex monocoque and unibody designs that enhance safety, efficiency, and performance. Key factors such as torsion, bending, aerodynamics, crash requirements, and consumer-driven testing, including Euro NCAP, have influenced these developments.

Below is a brief historical overview before I dive more deeply into the specifics of the changes.

1. Early Vehicles (Late 19th – Early 20th Century)

The first automobiles were based on horse-drawn carriage designs, featuring wooden frames with metal reinforcements. Chassis-based construction (body-on-frame) was the standard, where the body was mounted onto a separate ladder frame.

2. Steel Body and Mass Production (1920s – 1940s)

The introduction of pressed steel bodies improved strength and manufacturability. Henry Ford's Model T (1908-1927) pioneered mass production using an assembly line, making cars more affordable, whilst welded steel frames replaced riveted ones for better rigidity.

3. Monocoque (Unibody) Construction (1940s – 1970s)

In the mid-20th century, manufacturers began adopting monocoque (unibody) structures, where the body and frame were integrated for weight savings and crash safety. Vehicles such as the Citroën Traction Avant (1934) and Volkswagen Beetle (1938) showcased the advantages of monocoque design. Following this, crumple zones started being introduced to improve crashworthiness.

4. Advanced Materials and Aerodynamics (1980s – 2000s)

Aluminium and high-strength steel became more common to reduce weight and improve fuel efficiency. Computer-Aided Design (CAD) enabled optimized structures for aerodynamics and crash performance. Spaceframe designs (e.g., Audi A8's aluminium spaceframe in 1994) offered high rigidity with reduced mass. Safety regulations and programmes such as the EuroNCAP tests, led to reinforced passenger cells, airbags, and impact-absorbing materials.

5. Modern and Future Developments (2010s – Present)

Carbon fibre composites are increasingly used in high-performance and electric vehicles (e.g., BMW i3, Tesla Model S). Multi-material structures combine aluminium, steel, and composites for an ideal balance of strength, weight, and cost. Whilst, 3D printing, and AI-driven design are emerging for lightweight and highly optimized structures. Further, electric vehicles require structural adaptations for battery integration and safety.

A further impact on manufacturers for modern vehicle safety is strict testing procedures vehicles need to go through, such as the Euro NCAP testing. The Euro NCAP (European New Car Assessment Programme) is an independent vehicle safety testing organization that evaluates the crashworthiness and safety performance of new cars sold in Europe. Established in 1997, Euro NCAP conducts a series of rigorous crash tests and safety assessments to provide consumers with safety ratings, helping them make informed purchasing decisions. This provides publicly accessible data online visible to potential buyers of a certain car. Manufacturers have needed to make sure their vehicles are applicable to these new tests and able to perform well due to the impact these tests can have on vehicle sales should potential customers take an opinion on the car based off these tests. Impacts of the Euro NCAP on manufacturers can be:

- Encourages automakers to improve vehicle safety beyond legal requirements.
- Has led to widespread adoption of crash avoidance technologies and stronger crash-resistant designs.
- Higher safety-rated vehicles tend to perform better in real-world crash scenarios, reducing fatalities and serious injuries.

Euro NCAP has transformed vehicle structure design by pushing manufacturers toward stronger, more crash-resistant, and energy-absorbing vehicles. Advances in torsional stiffness, Vehicles need to resist deformation in frontal, side, and pole impacts while maintaining passenger compartment integrity. Higher torsional stiffness ensures the car does not twist excessively in crashes, protecting occupants. Crash energy management, pedestrian safety, and materials have also resulted in modern cars that offer significantly improved occupant protection compared to earlier designs. With ongoing updates to safety tests, the future will likely see further structural innovations, particularly in electric vehicles, automated safety features, and lightweight crash-resistant materials.

Torsion and Bending Considerations

Initially, vehicle frames were designed with limited consideration for torsional rigidity and bending resistance. As engines became more powerful and vehicle speeds increased, engineers realized that frames needed to withstand greater forces. BOF (Body-on-Frame) designs, though strong, were susceptible to flexing under torsional loads, leading to instability and reduced handling precision. (Johnson and King, 2017).

Aerodynamic Developments

Early vehicles were not designed with aerodynamics in mind. Their boxy shapes and exposed components created significant drag, limiting performance and fuel efficiency. As wind tunnel testing became more prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s, streamlined body designs emerged, reducing drag and improving vehicle stability at higher speeds. (Hucho, 1998).

Crash Safety Considerations

Crash safety was not a primary concern in early vehicle design. With minimal crumple zones and rigid frames, early automobiles provided poor occupant protection. It was not until the mid-20th century and programmes such as the EuroNCAP and other programmes such as the Global NCAP testing crashworthiness became a focal point, prompting structural changes to enhance passenger safety. (Robertson, 2015). Whilst also deep down in the manufactures mind, knowing that the lower rating a car gathers on such tests can greatly impact its sales figures worldwide.

As briefly mentioned above, the 1930s and 1940s saw the gradual transition from BOF to monocoque and unibody structures. These designs integrated the body and chassis into a single structure, improving torsional stiffness and reducing vehicle weight. (Barkan, Anderson and Sweeney, 2003). As a result, Unibody structures distribute loads more efficiently than traditional frames, minimizing flex and enhancing handling. Torsional rigidity became a key focus as automotive performance improved, particularly in sports and luxury vehicles where precise handling was crucial. Further to this, using the unibody design, manufacturers could create sleeker, more aerodynamic vehicle shapes. The integration of wind tunnels and computational fluid dynamics (CFD) enabled engineers to refine vehicle shapes, reducing drag and improving fuel efficiency. (Hucho, 1998).

In terms of crashworthiness, the 1950s and 1960s marked a turning point in crash safety. The introduction of crumple zones, designed to absorb impact energy, significantly improved passenger protection. The adoption of seatbelts, airbags, and reinforced cabin structures further enhanced crashworthiness. (Robertson, 2015; NHTSA, 2018). This still all came well before Euro NCAP was introduced in 1997, proving that manufactures weren't just adding this extra safety to look good on these tests, but instead for genuine occupant protection.

The evolution of vehicle structures has been a dynamic process driven by technological advancements, safety regulations, and consumer expectations. From early body-on-frame designs to modern unibody and composite structures, automotive engineering has continuously improved torsional rigidity, aerodynamics, crashworthiness, and manufacturing efficiency. As the industry progresses, emerging technologies such as electric vehicles and autonomous driving will further reshape vehicle structures, emphasizing sustainability and advanced safety features. The future promises continued innovation, ensuring that vehicle design remains at the forefront of engineering excellence.

3. Task 2 - Estimate the forces which must be resisted by the sills and the tunnel.

The Audi R8 Spyder has an aluminium spaceframe (Body-in-White - BIW), I will estimate the forces on the sills and tunnel during a crash and determine appropriate section sizes using Newton's Second Law ($F=MA$) and structural mechanics.

For a frontal impact, I can assume the following parameters based on Euro NCAP crash tests and real-world crash conditions:

Parameter	Value	Notes
Vehicle Mass (m)	1,695 kg	Audi R8 Spyder curb weight
Initial Speed (v_i)	56 km/h (15.56 m/s)	Euro NCAP frontal crash test speed
Final Speed (v_f)	0 m/s	Car comes to a stop
Crash Duration (t)	0.1 s	Typical deceleration time
Material	6000-series aluminium	Used in R8 spaceframe

By using Newton's Second Law, I can estimate the forces acting on the sills and tunnel of an Audi R8 Spyder in a frontal crash. The required cross-sectional area can be calculated to be 0.528 m^2 , but actual sections are much larger ($\sim 2.2 \text{ m}^2$ or more) to account for safety, deformation resistance, and real-world impact performance.

Newton's Second Law and Force Estimation on the Sills and Tunnel

In a frontal collision, the vehicle structure must resist and distribute impact forces to protect the occupants. Newton's second law states:

$$F = ma$$

where F is the force, m is the mass, and a is the acceleration.

Estimating Deceleration from Crash Pulse Data

Instead of assuming uniform deceleration, I can use the crash pulse graph from the brief, which provides actual acceleration data. The peak acceleration is approximately **35g**, where:

$$\text{Where } 1g = 9.81 \text{ m/s}^2$$

The peak acceleration:

$$a_{\text{max}} = 35 \times 9.81 = 343.35 \text{ m/s}^2$$

Assuming the vehicle mass is 1,695 kg

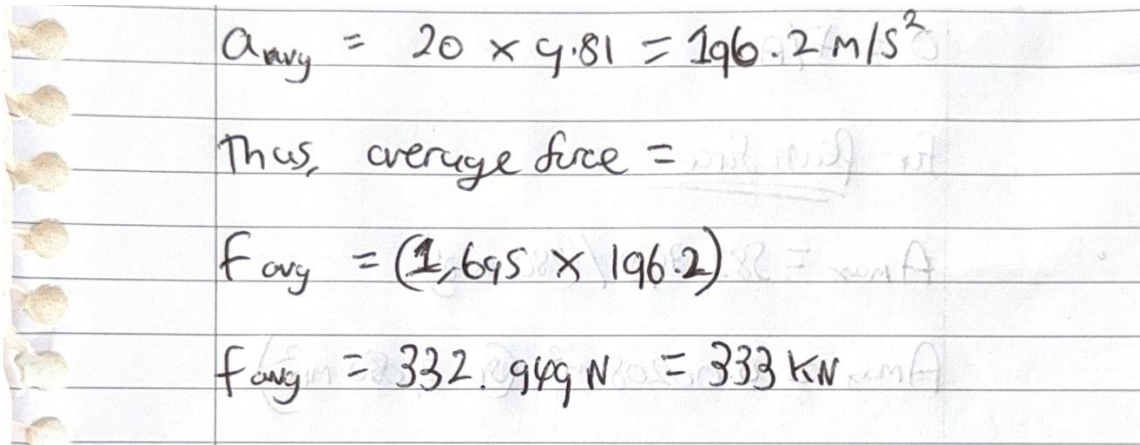
peak force:

$$F = (1,695 \times 343.35)$$

$$F = 582,398 \text{ N} \approx 582 \text{ kN}$$

However, peak acceleration lasts only briefly. A more realistic estimate considers the average acceleration over the crash duration.

From the graph, acceleration fluctuates but remains significant for about 0.06 to 0.08 seconds. Estimating an average acceleration of 20g:



Handwritten calculations on lined paper:

$$a_{avg} = 20 \times 9.81 = 196.2 \text{ m/s}^2$$

Thus, average force =

$$F_{avg} = (1,695 \times 196.2) = \text{N}$$
$$F_{avg} = 332,949 \text{ N} = 333 \text{ kN}$$

The sills and tunnel must withstand these forces without significant deformation. Using a high-strength aluminium alloy with a yield strength of 280 MPa, we estimate the required cross-sectional area (A) using:

$$\sigma = F/A$$

for Peak Force:

$$A_{\max} = 582,398 / (280 \times 10^6)$$
$$A_{\max} = 0.00208 \text{ m}^2 \text{ (or } 2,080 \text{ mm}^2)$$

for Average Force:

$$A_{\text{avg}} = 332,999 / (280 \times 10^6)$$
$$A_{\text{avg}} = 0.00119 \text{ m}^2 \text{ (or } 1,190 \text{ mm}^2)$$

Thus, the required section sizes range from 1,190 mm² to 2,080 mm², depending on whether we consider average or peak forces.

Real-world vehicle structures are larger than these theoretical estimates because:

- **Material Limitations:** Aluminium and composite materials need optimized shapes to distribute loads.
- **Load Paths:** Forces are distributed through multiple structural members, reducing localized stress. Although in this case there was no roof to bring into context due to it being an R8 spyder.
- **Crashworthiness Enhancements:** Multi-chamber designs, energy-absorbing zones, and reinforcements improve safety beyond static calculations.
- **Manufacturing and Assembly Constraints:** Practical considerations such as joining techniques and design tolerances influence real-world dimensions.
- **Regulatory Requirements:** Safety tests like EuroNCAP which I mentioned earlier mandate additional structural robustness.

Using crash pulse data refines my force estimates, leading to a more realistic assessment of section sizes. However, real-world design factors make actual structures larger and more complex than simple theoretical calculations can suggest.

My research has shown that Audi doesn't seem publish exact dimensions of the sill and tunnel cross-sections in order for me to compare to, but technical literature and engineering reports on the Audi Space Frame (ASF) architecture provide useful insights: Sills: The sills are large, multi-chamber aluminium extrusions. Their approximate size is in the range of 60 mm × 120 mm, depending on the location and variant. Assuming a wall thickness of 2–3 mm and multi-chamber reinforcement, the effective load-bearing area is often over 2,500–3,000 mm². (Audi Technology Portal, 2021)

Therefore, my calculated section sizes (1,190–2,080 mm²) are in the right ballpark, but real-world section sizes are typically larger, especially for aluminium components like the sills. The use of advanced materials like CFRP for the tunnel allows Audi to reduce size while maintaining or increasing strength, explaining any apparent discrepancy.

4. Conclusion

The way vehicle structures have developed over time is a testament to continuous innovation in engineering, safety, and materials. From simple body-on-frame designs to today's advanced unibody and composite structures, every stage of evolution has been driven by the need for stronger, lighter, and safer vehicles. Improvements in materials, aerodynamics, and crashworthiness—alongside rigorous safety tests like Euro NCAP—have shaped modern automotive design, ensuring better protection for occupants while maintaining performance and efficiency.

Looking at the forces acting on key structural components of the Audi R8 Spyder, such as the sills and tunnels highlights just how much thought goes into crash safety. While calculations give a rough estimate of the forces involved, real-world vehicle design considers far more, from material properties to energy absorption and structural reinforcements.

As the industry moves forward, new challenges like electric vehicle adaptations and sustainability will play a bigger role in shaping vehicle structures. With advances in lightweight materials, AI-driven design, and evolving safety regulations, the next generation of vehicles will likely be even stronger, safer, and more efficient than ever before.

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